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ABSTRACT

This document provides material useful to counseling center personnel on the topic of suicidal behaviors among college students. These items are included: (1) a list of seven signs which college personnel need to look for when evaluating suicidal risk in the college student; (2) an outline of prevention, intervention, and postvention topics to be discussed; (3) a questionnaire about policies of the college in response to a suicide and incidence of suicide on the campus; (4) a quotation about crisis management; (5) a list of seven important causes for suicidal behavior among college students; (6) a list of nine characteristics or services which are part of effective suicide prevention programs on campus; (7) a four-part model crisis response plan and definitions of a response situation; (8) a list of seven requirements for the preparation for a formal crisis response plan; and (9) a brief discussion of Tennessee State University's internal procedures for responding to a student death and to student suicide. References are included. (ABL)

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SUICIDAL BEHAVIORS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: PREVENTION, INTERVENTION AND POSTVENTION

Presented

at

The Twenty-Fifth Annual Meeting

of

The Southeastern Conference of Counseling Center Personnel

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Evaluating Suicidal Risk in the College Student

College personnel need to look for these signs, and give immediate attention to students who exhibit any of them.

1. Abrupt personality changes, such as becoming moody, restless, hypersensitive, self-depreciating, or withdrawn.
2. Verbally threatening suicide (a warning that should never be ignored or taken lightly).
3. Previous suicide attempts (the probability of success increases with each attempt).
4. Signs of depression, which include loss of appetite or over eating, sleep disturbances, lethargy, crying, and declining personal appearance.
5. Dramatic drop in academic performance due to apathy, lack of energy, or poor concentration.
6. Themes of suicide, death or depression in conversation, reading material, writing, or art work.
7. Making final arrangements, such as giving away prized personal possessions or making out a will.

Robert Mathiason
NASPA Journal, Spring 1988
Vol. 25, No. 4

Suicidal Behaviors Among College Students:

Prevention, Intervention and Postvention

Abstract and Outline

With a 100% plus increase in the youth suicide rate during the last twenty years, there has been a corresponding increase in episodes of suicidal behaviors among college students. This alarming and dramatic problem has resulted in many institutions of higher education becoming more attentive to prevention, intervention and postvention efforts and policies. The Tennessee State University programs which address these areas is presented. Group discussion and participation is anticipated and encouraged.

I. Prevention

   A. Recognizing Social Isolation
   B. Development of a Sense of Community
   C. Training of Counselors and Staff

II. Intervention

   A. Crisis Intervention
   B. Psychiatric Hospitalization
   C. Mandatory Psychiatric Withdrawal
   D. Individual and Family Psychotherapy
   E. Brief Illustrative Case Histories

III. Postvention

   A. Family
   B. Classmates
   C. Roomates
   D. Faculty and Staff
   E. Survivors of Suicide Group

1. Do you offer courses aimed at the prevention, intervention, or postvention of suicide? Yes____ No____

   If yes, how many courses do you offer? _____
   If yes, please list the course titles. _____
   _____

2. Are there other services available that deal with suicide prevention?

   A. Groups provided through campus counseling center Yes____ No____
   B. Groups provided through local mental health center Yes____ No____
   C. Inservice training for professionals Yes____ No____
   D. Inservice training for staff Yes____ No____
   E. Other services available
      Please list: _____
      _____

3. If a suicide is attempted in the university community, what campus unit or units are responsible for making a response? Please list units:

   _____
   _____

4. If a suicide is attempted or threatened, what procedure is generally followed? Please provide a brief description:

   _____

5. What procedure is generally followed if a suicide is completed or if the attempt is serious? Please provide a brief description:_____

6. How does the campus community respond to a complete suicide?

   A. Is there an organized response to or procedure for responding to the victim's family? (e.g. flowers, university representative at funeral) Describe:_____ Yes____ No____

   B. Is there an organized response to the needs of the victim's close friends? Describe:_____ Yes____ No____

   C. Is there an organized response to the needs of acquaintances/classmates? Describe:_____ Yes____ No____

   D. Is there an organized response to the needs of the student body as a whole? Describe:_____

7. If possible, please estimate the number of suicide attempts on your campus per year._____

8. If possible, please estimate the number of completed suicides on your campus per year. _____

Source: Glenn W. Stillion, Ph.D., Vice Chancellor for Student Development
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, North Carolina 28723
November 18, 1988

"WHEN A CRISIS OCCURS, IT IS TOO LATE TO DEVELOP A LOGICAL, WELL-CONCE IVED CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN AND IDENTIFY THE KEY CAMPUS PERSONNEL NEEDED TO MINIMIZE POTENTIAL PUBLIC RELATIONS PROBLEMS. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES MUST UTILIZE THE LULL BETWEEN STORMS TO IDENTIFY KEY PERSONNEL, SPECIAL EQUIPMENT, AND OPERATIVE POLICIES AS PART OF A CAREFULLY CONSTRUCTED AND WIDELY DISSEMINATED CRISIS RESPONSE PLAN. LIKE OTHER INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT CONCERNS, CRISIS RESPONSE PLANNING MINIMIZES POTENTIAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CIVIL LIABILITY RISKS."

Markwood, S.E. 1988

Some Important Causes For Suicidal Behaviors

Among College Students

1. Social isolation
2. Loneliness
3. Uncertainty about the future
4. Financial worries
5. Past or present loss of an intimate person
6. Concerns about studying effectively
7. Feelings of a sense of loss and social isolation may help to explain an "over-representation of freshmen" among undergraduates who attempt suicide.

Blain and Carmen, 1968, p. 837

Wolfe and Cotler, 1973, p. 310

Newsweek On Campus, December, 1983, p. 26.

Effective Suicide Prevention Program on Campus

Colleges need to do more to create an atmosphere in which suicidal behavior is less likely rather than simply withdrawing students who threaten or attempt suicide.

Strive to develop more of a sense of community on campus and willingness to define and enforce high standards of personal behavior.

Establishment of a strict but fair code of conduct on campus may contribute to an environment in which students are encouraged to acquire a critically important sense of moral direction and purpose.

The availability of counseling services and other forms of support for students should be a part of an effective suicide prevention program.

Discussion of social issues during the New Student Orientation session can be especially meaningful.

Many students who attempt suicide had experienced a progressive isolation from meaningful social relationships and lacked someone to tell their troubles to.

Even the most suicidal person is a danger to him/herself for only a relatively brief time.

A first step in effective prevention is the development of a close and significant relationship with a counselor.

Counselors need to be well trained, retrained and have a knowledge and willingness of when to refer.

Pavela, G. 1985

Miller, M., 1988

MODEL CRISIS RESPONSE PLAN

Designed To:

(A) SET IN MOTION CERTAIN INITIAL SAFETY AND COMMUNICATIONS PROCESSES

(B) CENTRALIZE THE SCHOOL'S DECISION PROCESS AND CONTACTS WITH THE MEDIA

(C) ACTIVATE A DESIGNATED CRISIS

RESPONSE TEAM

(D) PROVIDE FOR A PLANNED INSTITUTIONAL FOLLOW-UP

RESPONSE SITUATION

A CRUCIAL OR CRITICAL INCIDENT OR SITUATION INVOLVING SERIOUS DAMAGE TO COLLEGE FACILITIES, PROPERTY, OR EQUIPMENT OR SERIOUS THREAT TO THE HEALTH, SAFETY, OR WELFARE OF THE FACULTY, STUDENTS, PROFESSIONAL OR CLASSIFIED STAFF OR THE COLLEGE

Markwood, S.E. 1988

PREPARATION

PREPARATION OF A FORMAL CRISIS RESPONSE PLAN REQUIRES:

(A) A PERIODIC REVIEW OF ALL CURRENT INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES

(B) CONSULTATION WITH LEGAL COUNSEL

(C) ESTABLISHMENT OF SPECIAL SAFETY AND/OR ACCIDENT COMMITTEES

(D) DEVELOPMENT OF ACCURATE REPORTING PROCEDURES

(E) IMPLEMENTATION OF REGULAR FACILITY INSPECTIONS

(F) REGULAR TRAINING FOR PROFESSIONAL AND CLASSIFIED STAFF

(G) PERIODIC REVIEW OF THE CRISIS PLAN, PERSONNEL, TRAINING AND RESOURCES

(Janosik & Andrews, 1985)

Tennessee State University - Counseling Services

Internal Procedures for Crisis Intervention

The University Counseling Services initiates these procedures for responding to crises. These procedures are as follows:

1. Student Death: Knowledge of a student's death will cause the University Counseling Services to do the following:

   (a) If appropriate, the student's family will be contacted with the intention of giving any aid that we can provide.

   (b) Contact the Campus Security, Registrar's Office, Housing Office, Student Health Service, the School Dean, Department Head, the University Public Relations Office giving appropriate information.

   (c) Initiate a letter of institutional condolences to the family from the President's desk.

Tennessee State University - Counseling Services

Internal Procedure For Response To Suicide Attempts

8. Suicide Attempts: Knowledge of such attempts will cause the University Counseling Services to do the following:

(a) Send a counselor to make contact with the individual involved.

(b) Contact Campus Security

(c) Cooperate with Campus Security in clearing the area of the curious in cases of public display.

(d) Enlist the aid of family and friends where possible or proper.

(e) If drugs are involved, find out what and, if possible, get a sample for analysis, and see that it is given to emergency personnel.

(f) If necessary, aid in transportation to emergency services.

(g) If no drugs, cooperate in transporting as soon as possible to an emergency room or psychiatric clinic as appropriate.

(h) If the individual is a threat to self and/or others, the counselor will enlist the aid of the Police.

(i) If appropriate, contact the Registrar's Office, Housing Office, Financial Aid Office, Student Accounts Office, Student Health Head, and the University's Public Relations Office.

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Suicide and Its Aftermath

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Edited by Edward J. Dunne, John L. McIntosh, and Karen Dunne-Maxim

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